

# How SRV-Based Image Issues Can Inform Considerations of Advocate Identity & Recruitment in Citizen Advocacy

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## Background: The Concept of Citizen Advocacy, its Historical Association with Social Role Valorization, & its Concomitant Orientation to Image Issues

COMMONLY MANY PEOPLE WHO PROMOTE and implement Social Role Valorization (Osburn, 2006; Race, 1999; Wolfensberger, 1998) are at least familiar with the concept of Citizen Advocacy (CA), if not actually involved in a Citizen Advocacy program or the larger CA movement. Citizen Advocacy is a personal advocacy scheme that promotes and protects the interests of people whose well-being is at risk, by establishing and supporting one-to-one (or near one-to-one) unpaid relationship commitments between such persons and suitable other members of the community. CA has a clear set of fundamental, defining principles and safeguards. The Citizen Advocacy office matches the person in need of advocacy ('protégé') and a person with relevant competencies ('citizen advocate'), and provides support to the citizen advocate who represents the interests of the protégé as if those interests were the advocate's own. Because the citizen advocate does not receive payment or other forms of compensation for the advocacy engagement, a significant conflict of interest is removed, thereby enabling independence of representation of the protégé's interests. The roles assumed by advocates vary with each relationship, and include those of spokesperson, protector, mentor, assistant, and friend.

As the facilitator of such relationships, the Citizen Advocacy office itself needs to be independent in its administration and funding vis-à-vis service-providing agencies, whose clients may (presently or potentially) be protégés in need of advocacy, and against which citizen advocates may have to advocate. Historically, Citizen Advocacy offices have tended to recruit advocates primarily for people with an intellectual impairment.

The connection between Social Role Valorization (SRV) and Citizen Advocacy is hardly surprising, given that CA was conceptualized by the same person who developed SRV; namely, Wolf Wolfensberger. He conceptualized CA in the late 1960s, culminating in the opening of the first Citizen Advocacy office in 1970. Thus, since its inception, Citizen Advocacy has been influenced by the theory of normalization (Wolfensberger, 1972) firstly, and then SRV.

One point of confluence for SRV and CA has been in relation to imagery. Almost certainly, Citizen Advocacy was the first advocacy scheme to be oriented to, and mindful of, image issues. In the evaluation tool for Citizen Advocacy programs, *CAPE: Standards for Citizen Advocacy Program Evaluation*, the principle of **Positive Interpretations of Handicapped People** emphasises that "the advocacy office should be a model in the interpretation of handicapped people" (O'Brien & Wolfensberger, 1979). In all aspects of program operation, from its office location to funding

sources and fundraising methods, the Citizen Advocacy office is expected to strive to avoid negative images, and to promote positive yet honest images, of protégés of the program and other people with impairments.

It follows, then, that image issues permeate the work of the Citizen Advocacy office. This article, however, only focuses on SRV-derived implications that warrant consideration in relation to the social image of advocates recruited. It should also be noted that an assumption in the ensuing discussion is that the class of people for whom advocates are recruited are those with impairments.

### **Implications of the Social Image of People Recruited as Advocates**

**T**HE FIRST TWO OF THE so-called four core functions of the Citizen Advocacy office are to identify potential advocates and protégés, and then establish suitable one-to-one matches between them (Wolfensberger & Peters, 2002/2003). Obviously, the advocate recruitment and selection process must be undertaken with a high level of discernment regarding the identity and attributes of the potential advocate. Some definitions of Citizen Advocacy (e.g., O'Brien, 1987) refer to an advocate as someone with a valued identity, suggesting that a positive social image is a relevant resource for a person assuming an advocacy role.

The social image of the advocate—particularly as a result of the advocate's personal impression (appearance and behaviour) as well as circumstances—can yield at least three implications, as discussed below.

*1. Image transfer through social juxtaposition.* By definition, people who are devalued in and by their culture will have low social value and a negative image in the eyes of most typical members of the culture. They will have image needs—i.e., the need for a positive image—irrespective of the reasons underlying their devaluation, and irrespective of whatever other needs they may also have (e.g., for security, positive relationships, or competencies).

According to SRV theory, social juxtapositions result in the transfer of images between those parties (perceived to be) associated with each other (e.g., Wolfensberger, 1998, pp. 64–65).

The dynamics of negative perception and image transfer dictate that the Citizen Advocacy office orient its concern to the social image of the prospective advocate, given the reality that the person to whom the advocate will be matched (the protégé) is not apt to be positively perceived within the larger society. The importance of recruiting a person with a positive image, to act as an advocate for someone who is image-jeopardized, is underlined by the concept of the 'conservatism corollary' of SRV (e.g., Wolfensberger, 1998, pp. 124–127). The conservatism corollary is based on the assumption that a party that is devalued or otherwise at risk of being hurt is much more likely to be detrimentally affected by additional (even minor) devaluing dynamics. This heightened vulnerability—in this context, the risk of further image degradation of the protégé, given the cultural predisposition to view the person in a negative light—suggests that an advocate whose personal image is poor will exacerbate the image burden of the protégé. On the other hand, the conservatism corollary ascribes particular importance to the positive impact of compensatory measures for an 'at-risk' party, which means that in the advocate-protégé image scenario, the valued image of the advocate can significantly enhance or counterbalance the protégé's image.

An additional consideration is that if an advocate is believed to be representative of the local Citizen Advocacy program, then the advocate's image may have a spillover result—thus affecting the image of others associated with the program, including other protégés and people with disabilities, and conceivably the Citizen Advocacy office itself.

Lamentably, my experience with, and observation of, the Citizen Advocacy movement in Australia and the United States would suggest that not all Citizen Advocacy offices are solicitous about, or even conscious of, these image transfer

issues. A possible explanation for this inattention is that some CA offices fail to appreciate what I would call the 'butterfly effect' of imagery (in allusion to a scientific theory referred to by that colloquial term): that even apparently minor image issues with no obvious or direct impact can ultimately have significant consequences. One reason that the conveyance of images can have a delayed impact is because it initially involves the often unconscious communication of messages about the observed party, before those messages affect how the observer party perceives, judges, and responds to the former. Thus, a Citizen Advocacy office that lacks a sophisticated understanding of imagery may not grasp the longer-term repercussions of an advocate's image on the image of the protégé and even others.

Another reason for inattention to the social image of the advocate, resulting in the recruitment of an advocate with a poor image, could be due to a CA office's reasoning that such an image-impaired person should still be provided with the opportunity to advocate for someone (Thomas, 2000/2001). But regardless of whatever (non-image) benefits that may be derived by the protégé from a match in which the advocate's image is negative, an inescapable reality is that the image of *both* parties will suffer further from such an association.

2. *Imitation and modeling.* SRV theory informs us of the power of imitation and role modeling, and especially so for devalued people who typically have limited access to valued models (e.g., Wolfensberger, 1998, pp. 120–121). The implications of the social image of the advocate, in terms of serving as a role model for the protégé, should be obvious. But the dynamics of imitation and modeling assume greater significance when considering the possibility that the protégé may well deeply identify with the advocate—given that the former may not have experienced many personal, positive, freely-given relationships—and thus be inclined to imitate the advocate in ways that will impact on the image and competency of the protégé: i.e., if the advocate is a positive role model

whom the protégé identifies with, then the protégé will likely imitate valued ways of acting, and vice versa.

3. *Responsiveness of others to the advocate and the advocacy goal(s).* The social image of the advocate will be a key factor in influencing the nature of the response of relevant others, e.g., in the advocate's efforts to represent the protégé.

Credibility is an important resource, particularly when the advocate is required to assume a spokespersonship or similar role in representing the protégé vis-à-vis third parties. Especially in early contact between the advocate and relevant third parties, the image that is projected by the advocate can affect the first impressions of, and credibility attributed to, the advocate by those parties. And given the power of first impressions, they may also be the last!

Generally speaking, then, an advocate's positive image is likely to predispose relevant third parties to respond in ways that further the desired advocacy goal(s) for the protégé. Conversely, an advocate with a devalued image is apt to register poorly on the credibility meter, which in turn can militate against the advocate's efforts to elicit from those parties the kinds of responses that are consistent with the protégé's interests.

### **Caveats & Qualifications About Advocate Image Issues, Especially in Light of any Reservations About Recruiting an Advocate**

**I**F A CITIZEN ADVOCACY OFFICE has image-related reservations about a potential advocate, those concerns should be analysed systematically, in an effort to resolve the question as to whether or not to proceed with the recruitment of that person as an advocate.

Unfortunately, some CA offices in Australia and the US tend to ignore all image issues, and yet other offices may assign a disproportionate or misplaced emphasis on certain such issues, including those pertaining to the image of the advocate—much in the same way as human services, and even the wider community, pay undue

or exclusive attention to one channel of imagery, namely, language about certain groups in society. But it must be understood that the primary mission of Citizen Advocacy is not to address image issues concerning people with impairments or who are otherwise devalued; to invoke the terminology of the SRV construct of model coherency: image defence and enhancement is not CA program *content*, although image considerations have relevance to program *process*.

Examined below, largely through an SRV lens, are points that seek to nuance deliberations about the potentially problematic image of an advocate-candidate.

1. *The significance of the advocate's image relative to specific protégé needs and the corresponding advocacy role(s).* Given that the advocacy role(s) of individual advocates will differ according to the specific needs of each protégé, the social image of the advocate may be of greater significance to certain advocacy roles than others.

For instance, as previously mentioned, a positive image can be a crucial asset when the advocate is in a spokespersonship role that necessitates vigorously advocating 'against' certain parties—such as the protégé's service providers who may display a topdown mindset and a propensity to be dismissive of advocates as 'unreliable amateurs.'

Another example of how the image of an advocate can be a vital element in the attainment of an advocacy objective is that involving the social integration of the protégé. If one important role of the advocate is to act as a catalyst for the acceptance and inclusion of the protégé in the valued community, but the advocate's poorly perceived image (due to, say, appearance and/or lifestyle) has led to him/her being shunned by others, then that advocate is hardly likely to have the community connections to transact the integration of the protégé.

But there may be other instances in which the image of the advocate is of relatively peripheral rather than central concern, given the needs of, and the attendant advocacy role(s) for, the protégé. Certain non-spokesmanship roles that do not

have a 'public' dimension to them—such as those of practical assistant and confidante—might serve as examples.

Nonetheless, two qualifications to the foregoing are warranted. **Firstly**, what has been suggested—and should accordingly be noted—is that the nature of certain advocacy roles may render the issue of the advocate's image to be less relevant, but not **irrelevant**. **Secondly**, a related point is that regardless of the initial advocacy role(s) for which an advocate is recruited, in a long-term relationship with the protégé (as most Citizen Advocacy matches are intended to be), it can be expected that at least some of the needs of the protégé will evolve, requiring different advocacy responses and roles, which in turn may confer greater or lesser importance to the advocate's social image.

2. *The distinction between the potentially image-affecting characteristic(s) of the advocate and the overall image of the advocate.* SRV reminds us that most people have some negatively valued characteristics, but the possession of such characteristics will not necessarily thrust people into a devalued role; and indeed, other factors can mitigate that possibility (e.g., Wolfensberger, 1998). Derivatively, in the context of advocate image issues, it can be argued that an image-related devalued characteristic of an advocate does not routinely translate into an overall devalued image of that person. A Citizen Advocacy office needs to be cognizant of the following kinds of variables when evaluating the merits of recruiting an advocate who has potentially image-imperilling characteristics.

a. *The number of (negative) potentially image-affecting characteristics of the prospective advocate, and the degree of (negative) value ascribed to them.* The number of negatively perceived characteristics of the potential advocate, and the degree of negative value attributed to them, will play a pivotal role in the formation of the social image of that person. For example, if the prospective advocate is someone who has experienced long-term unemployment, that information alone is unlikely to jeopardize the person's image—despite the fact

that economic unproductiveness is not valued in most societies—because of the increasing social acceptance of the unpalatable reality that unemployment is (more or less) an inherent feature of the market economy. However, if the advocate-candidate is unemployed, dresses shabbily, and speaks with a speech impediment, then these socially undesirable characteristics will cumulatively yield a decisively negative image of the person.

As well, because of their perceived degree of negative value, certain characteristics are apt to have a more severe image impact than others. For instance, someone who is known to have a criminal conviction will have a considerably more serious image burden than another person whose image tarnish is due to the adoption of a glaring counterculture lifestyle.

*b. The 'visibility' of the (negative) potentially image-affecting characteristic of the prospective advocate.* The extent to which a negatively valued characteristic of the potential advocate will affect the overall image of the person will also depend on how visible or otherwise obvious the characteristic is to others. For example, a person with epilepsy—whose condition is not widely known and is mostly controlled with medication—is not likely to be encumbered with an image problem, unlike another who is suspected of having a mental disorder because the person's appearance and behaviour suggests that something is 'wrong' with him/her.

*c. The compensating positive attributes and social roles of the prospective advocate.* Despite having an image-related negatively valued characteristic, a potential advocate's positive attributes and roles can have a countervailing influence on his/her image, on the whole. For example, a person who is a member of a devalued ethnic minority group in a particular society may be articulate and exude an air of confidence and competence. Therefore, the personal impression he/she creates can offset or eclipse the pervasive negative images associated with people of that racial background. Indeed, it is likely that a person with such attributes would

hold—or have access to—a number of valued social roles.

## Conclusion

IN ANY GIVEN CITIZEN ADVOCACY match, the image of the advocate will affect more than just the image of the protégé. In light of the importance and implications of advocate image issues, a Citizen Advocacy office must resist the temptation to think in monochromatic terms, but engage in reasoned analysis of whether-or-not-to-recruit questions arising from the image of a person who is potentially an advocate. To that end, Social Role Valorization—given its association with, and relevance to, Citizen Advocacy—can provide insight and guidance to the CA office.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This article is based in part on a shorter article, also written by the author, which was published in the October 1995 issue of the Citizen Advocacy Forum.*

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